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ABSTRACT

Discussions about interracial families usually end with the question, "but what about the children?" This paper examines the prerequisites of parenting biracial children, whether in foster, adoptive, one-, or two-parent families and provides suggestions to help parents of biracial children in their child rearing. The paper identifies prerequisites of parenting biracial children as: (1) being a good parent, highlighting that parents of biracial children face many of the same parenting challenges as all families; (2) supporting both parents, focusing on respecting the heritage, culture, and race of both parents and their families; and (3) recognizing and not retreating from the challenge to society posed by interracial families, especially supporting the children's unique status in society and not allowing professionals to define children's identity. The paper contains several specific suggestions directed to help parents of biracial children, including: (1) be open about racial differences; (2) be open about your child's differences; (3) advocate for your child; (4) develop positive relationships with the extended family; (5) expose your children to your personal cultural heritage; (6) have mixed-race friends; (7) help your children fill out government forms (with questions that address race); and (8) be careful about interjecting race and ethnicity when solving problems. (KB)

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Raising Good Biracial Children

by

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All discussions about interracial families usually end up with the question, "but what about the children?" Many people believe children of interracial relationships will suffer for their parent's choices. Most professionals who work with children believe we cannot raise our children to be whole, productive, mature citizens. While this notion is, of course, preposterous, as interracial parents we must carefully provide for the developmental needs of our children. Much of what we need to provide - support, choices, communication and discipline - is just good parenting. Beyond this we need to develop our children's sense of self-worth and positive identity.

Interracial parents include foster, adoptive, one parent and two-parent families who have biracial children. While this discussion is primarily targeted to biological parents of biracial children, much of it applies to all interracial parents.

The first three sections of this piece come under the area of prerequisites: being a good parent, supporting both parents' heritages, and recognizing interracial marriage as a challenge to the status quo. The fourth section provides specific suggestions to help parent biracial children.

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Prerequisites

a) Being a Good Parent. Parenting is clearly a learned skill that requires a tremendous amount of time, resources, and patience. Good parenting is a deliberate process. Discipline techniques, positive self-concept development, allowing for individuality, helping in decision making, advocacy of your child, in social situations, and teaching about sex and drugs, are challenges faced by all parents. Books, TV programs, and parenting classes are dedicated to this difficult task. Central to the notion of good parenting is the understanding sacrifices in career, wealth, time, and personal status must sometimes be made to meet our parenting commitment.

Blended families, foster and adoptive parents, and divorced parents face additional parenting challenges. Again there are many books, articles, and parenting groups that provide specific skills and information to assist these parents.

Interracial families must understand many of their parenting challenges are the same as those faced by all families; don't assume all your family difficulties are a result of your interracial family.

b) Supporting Both Parents. Interracial parents must feel good about their own ethnic, racial and historical background. The white parent should not be ashamed of his/her European heritage, or try to hide or ignore it. The parent of color should not belittle other people of color.

feel they are superior because they married a white person, or try to be white themselves. Each parent must also respect and support the identity and heritage of their spouse. Other differences in the marriage - religious, national, cultural or linguistic - must also be treated with understanding and respect.

Do not let your relatives put down your spouse's family, ethnic or racial background, or culture.

When marital problems arise - including the case of separation or divorce - don't blame the problem on your partner's racial or ethnic background. While you might be angry and disappointed at your partner, you cannot become angry and disappointed at a whole group of people. Not only is this bad for you and future relations with your partner, it will teach your children to be ashamed of part of their heritage, which is very destructive.

It is critical each parent respect the heritage, culture, and race of the other parent, and that parent's family.

c) Interracial Families are a Challenge to the Status Quo. When we crossed traditional social boundaries to marry, we challenged society. When we then had children, we challenged society even further. This is very healthy (Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Paul Robeson challenged society). But we must not now retreat, saying, "I don't want my children to be seen as different," and, "I want to raise my children as society views them." Our children are

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the result of a marriage that some view with interest and curiosity; others with outright hostility. These are the facts; thus we must feel proud of our challenge to society, and not try to dissolve back into the woodwork.

We must support our children's unique status in society. We must not allow professionals, social workers, educators or political leaders to define who our children are. Voice strong disagreement to notions of your children being marginal, abnormal, mixed up, or unable to fit in. Demand that they are normal, and that professionals and institutions adjust their antiquated notions to meet the real needs of your children.

Specific Suggestions to Help Parents of Biracial Children.

a) Be Open About Racial Differences. Between age 3 and 4 most children become interested in their physical characteristics, and how they compare to others. "I am bigger than daddy," "I can run faster than mommy," and, "my hair is like grandpa's" are all examples of this healthy development. They become interested in hair color, skin tone, height, weight, beards, sexual differences, people with handicaps, and physical abilities like riding a bike. All these questions need to be answered - by teachers and parents - honestly, accurately, and simply. Point out that physical characteristics are inherited from both parents, that people come in two sexes - male and female - and that

physical differences are part of the exciting natural world of plants, animals and people.

Don't avoid questions about skin color, eye color, and hair texture. However, make sure to communicate that, in and of themselves, these physical differences, like height, weight, and hair color, have not value - good or bad. When biracial children ask these questions, show them how physical characteristics come from both parents, and parents' heritages. Use paints, crayons, transparent paper, and food coloring to show how mixing of colors occur.

b) Be Open About Your Child's Differences. Other children, adults, teachers and professionals who work with children will view your children as being different. Let your children know they get stared at because they are different; talk to them about the notion people are uncomfortable around people who are different. And yes, some people will even decide they dislike your children. Other students will also ask your children, "What are you, anyway, black or white?" or, "How come your mother is Mexican, and your father white?" and, "You're black, so how come your father is white - are you adopted?"

Help your children respond to these questions. They need to know other children are confused because no-one has told them about biracial children. They need to feel good about their mixed heritage. And they need a label to use - like biracial - to help them respond to these questions by children and adults. Also help your children

know that it's good to learn to stand up for themselves - they should feel proud of this skill.

c) Advocate for Your Child. Whenever we enroll one of our four children in a school, day care, camp or other program, we discuss our expectations with the teacher. These usually concern TV watching, discipline, and nap-times. We also discuss the biracial identity of our children, and how we expect the teacher and institution to support that identity.

We expect our older children to initially fight for their own rights - including support of their identity. If, however, problems continue, we talk to the appropriate person: teacher, administrator, etc. We also visit our children's schools and child care centers often, to get a feeling of the climate of the institution.

Curriculum materials, posters, books, public relations materials and manuals must represent children and adults from a variety of cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds - including interracial.

> d) Develop Positive Relationships with the Extended Family. All children need to have direct, positive experiences with both of their parent's relatives. Children need to spend time with their grandparents, hear about the histories of their parents, know which country their relatives came from, and what language they spoke. Art, stories, and tales of their relatives also adds color and content to the heritage of each parent. Photos, books,

songs, etc., all help children develop a sense of history and heritage.

For interracial families, this connection with both sets of grandparents is often difficult to achieve, because often one or more grandparent objects to the marriage. However, many parents initially object to the marriage choice of their sons and daughters - even if the choice is with a person of the same race, ethnic group, and religion. Parents have such high expectations!

Children still need to know the history, culture, heros, and triumphs of both sides of their family. Grandparents often change - so don't give up!

You might also visit the place of birth of both parents, meet friends of both families, and visit museums, art galleries, festivals, and music activities that reflect the heritage of both sets of grandparents.

e) Expose Your Children to Your Personal Cultural Heritage. Biracial children need to gain strength and richness from the cultures represented by both parents. But this must not be forced or artificial. If the black parent does not like jazz, don't suddenly feel you need to attend jazz festivals. If you don't read Ebony yourself, don't buy it just for looks. There are many black families in this country that don't subscribe to Ebony; many white families that don't read the National Geographic.

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One of the central roles of raising non-prejudicial children is to teach them that all people are individuals - also within ethnic and racial groups.

An effort must be made to expose our children to the racial richness of their heritage; but it must be something everyone genuinely enjoys doing. Books, dolls, statuettes, and photos displayed in the home need to reflect this diversity. They also must reflect the individuality of everyone, and the individual tastes, joys, and pleasures of each member of the family.

Of course adults can also grow, develop new tastes, and enjoy learning. Do this with your children - and be aware of the need to connect them with their multicultural heritage. But don't do something you have no interest in.

f) Have Mixed Race Friends. Through neighbors, social functions, college affiliations, and personal friends, expose your children to other interracial families. These families do not have to be the same racial combinations as your own; what's important is the exposure of our children to the notion mixed families and biracial children are normal, healthy, bright, and acceptable. Transracially adopted children, foster children in homes different from their heritage, and biracial children in divorced homes also provide good models for our children.

Parents also need adult friends that represent both heritages represented by the family. This seems to

happen automatically when both parents are interested in people for their individual strengths and values. Never make friends with someone just because they represent one of the heritages of your children - this is artificial and dangerous

g) Help Your Children Fill out Government Forms.

As your children get older, they will be requested to fill out all the forms that have no multiracial or biracial category. Talk to your children about this issue as you would any other developmental challenges: sex education, pledging allegiance to the flag, watching movies at school they are not allowed to watch at home, etc. Explain to your children why racial and ethnic categories are counted, why there is no category for them, and the dangers of grouping people into distinct classifications. Discuss which category your child would like to fill out, and whether the adult in attendance will let your child do so.

My oldest daughter, who is now 12, has decided to always check 'other', because as she says, 'black' or 'white' are not correct.

h) Be Careful About Interjecting Race and Ethnicity in Solving Problems. Most conflicts your children have - with other children, and with adults - have nothing to do with race. Often with younger children the disagreements occur over competing for toys, materials, a favorite seat, or the teacher's attention. With older

children conflicts arise most often because of social issues.

If, after exploring other causes for your child's problem, you believe race has something to do with it, address the prejudice of the individual person. Never give the impression the issue is with a whole group of people. And never develop the pattern where you - and later your child - automatically assume race is the cause of the problem. This is very dangerous.

To raise good biracial children we must respect each other's backgrounds and heritages, have pride in our childrens' rich identity, and do everything other good parents must do. Additionally we have to deliberately support and develop our children's sense of positive biracial identity, and proudly advocate for our children's and our familys' self-worth.